2015 Benjamin

MENSCHEL

Fellowship

EXHIBITION

THE COOPER UNION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AND ART

LAUREN BISHOP ART | MAX GIDEONSE ARCHITECTURE

SAM CHOI ARCHITECTURE | CASSANDRA ENGSTROM ARCHITECTURE

ARI FERDMAN ART

BRANDON LOCKFOOT ART

VANESSA TAI ARCHITECTURE

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2016
COOPER COLLECTION

FEBRUARY 2–19, 2016

The Benjamin Menschel Fellowship Program to support creative inquiry was endowed by a grant given to The Cooper Union by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation in 1994 to support work in the fields of art, architecture, design, and engineering. This generous grant was intended to provide funding to exceptional students who propose scholarly, independent projects that will in some way provide a culmination to their educational endeavors at The Cooper Union. It is the hope of the Goldsmith Foundation that students designated as Menschel Fellows will be encouraged by their awards to complete bodies of artwork, develop scientific protocols, or otherwise further their intellectual investigations in a manner that will provide inspiration and illumination to the community as a whole.

Professor Sohnya Sayres, *Project Director*

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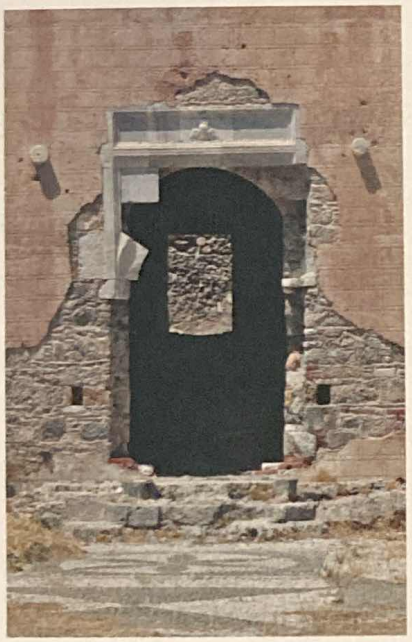
EXHIBITION

left:
Brandon Lockfoot

Cover image:
Ari Ferdman

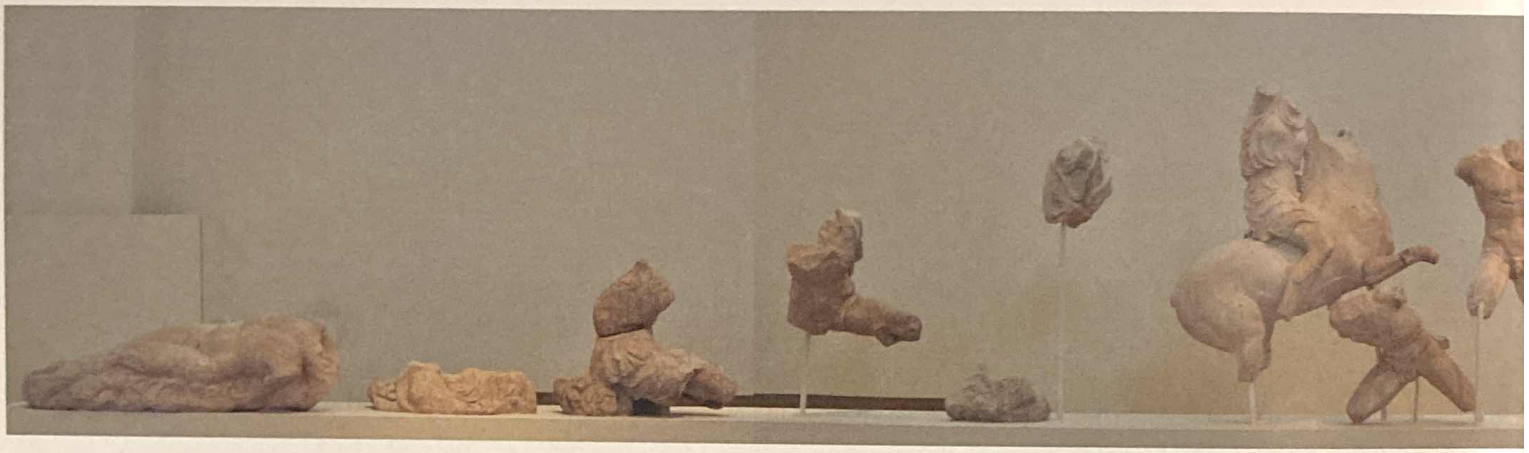
YOU ARE NOT ENTERING THROUGH A DOOR: GREECE AND TURKEY, SITES OF FORCED EXCHANGE OF POPULATIONS, C. 1923

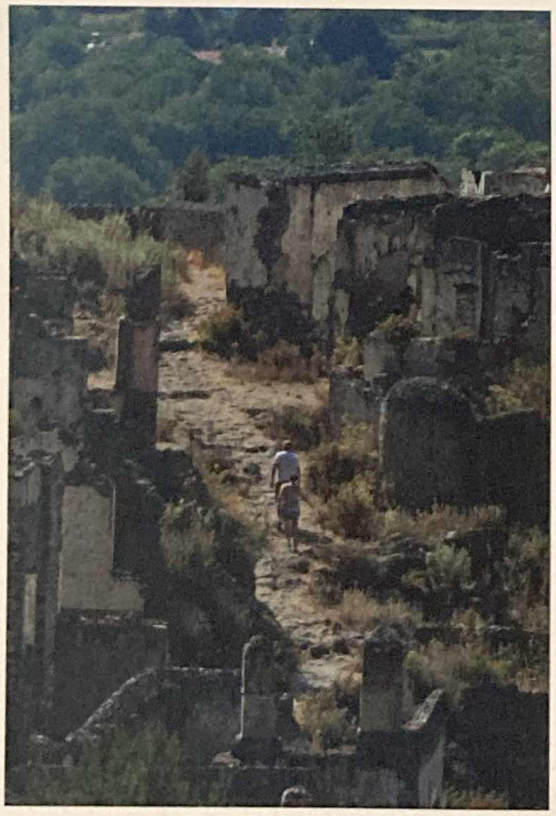


For our Menschel project, we travelled between three sites that demonstrate the impacts of the forced population exchange between Turkey and Greece following the First World War: Kayaköy, Turkey; Rhodes, Greece; and Nea Makri, a suburb of Athens founded by refugees from Kayaköy. This exchange was the modern era's first legislated forced migration. The intent of the agreement was to bring demography into line with geography in an effort to forestall ethnic strife. Considered a diplomatic success at the time, the treaty spoke of balance, but the realities of dislocation caused gross asymmetries. One and a half million Rumani (Greek Orthodox Christians) were displaced from Anatolia, a number far exceeding the capacities of the existing infrastructure of the Greek cities that received them. Correspondingly, four hundred and fifty thousand Muslims were absorbed by the new Turkish Republic, primarily into cities already depopulated by the war. Many formerly Greek towns in Turkey were erased altogether, while Athens doubled in size.

We chose these sites because of our interest in the practices of architectural and social preservation. Within a landscape so defined by the depth of its past, we asked how the remnants of this recent history have been socially and materially integrated into that larger context as defined by these preservation practices. Our first site was Kayakoy, a depopulated Greek town on the Turkish coast. A private company runs it as an attraction while the state auctions off a lease to develop it as a "historical recreation" of its past. We explored the relationship between the site

LAUREN BISHOP | MAX GIDEONSE



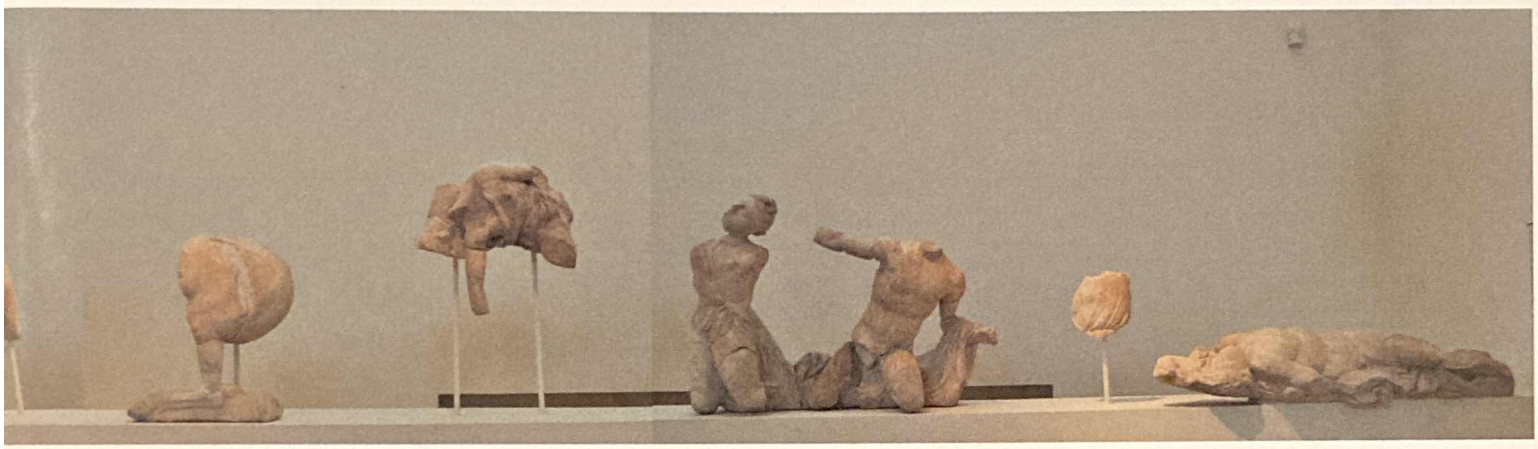


and the archaeological museum in nearby Fethiye, which holds—but does not display—the village's most prominent artifacts.

From Kayakoy, we went to the island of Rhodes, where we surveyed the mosques built during the island's time under Ottoman reign. After Rhodes, we travelled to Nea Makri, where we spoke with descendants of the refugees. We began to discover physical, not just social, relationships between their old town and this new home.

Kayakoy and Nea Makri are direct products of a shared history, but today they offer different recollections of that past. In our work, we consider how these sites are actually interpretations of memory. In this exhibition, we seek to acknowledge that decisions made in display shape the perception of history. Our response was to arrange through text, drawings, and photographs a demonstration of an active survey method, that is, the practices needed to sensitize visitors to a remnant's provenance.

LAUREN BISHOP | MAX GIDEONSE



YANBIAN: A FLICKERING PAST TENSE

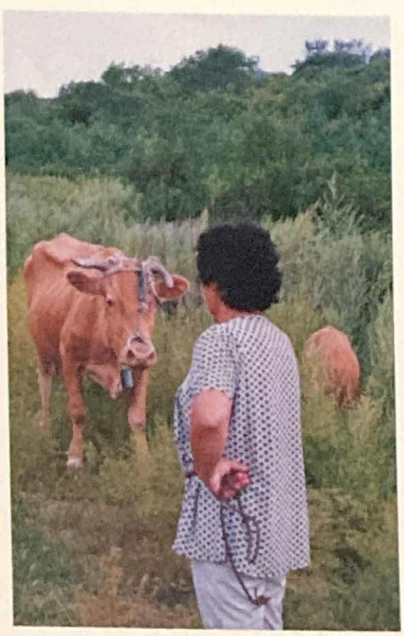
Having migrated from Korea when it was still unified, the Joseonjok people carry the trace of a lost culture. Still employing antiquated agricultural and architectural practices, the Joseonjok have established their own microcosm within China, gaining political recognition as an autonomous prefecture. At the core of their identity is a contradiction between their imagined past and their concrete present. This conflict has shaped not only their survival, but also their evolution. Although physically grounded, the Joseonjok seem like nomads, cut off spatially and temporally from their present-day surroundings, constantly trying to cultivate disintegrating roots in a foreign soil.

The Joseonjok villages are organized as a dilapidated network of isolated nodes that radiate out of Yanji (the capital of Yanbian) and disappear gradually into the landscape. Dirt roads connect each settlement to the center, but as one moves further from the city, one moves further into the past. Because of a lack of physical and social connections, the villages tend to look inward, intensifying the nostalgia that infuses the Joseonjok way of life.

The geography that isolates the Joseonjok mirrors their cultural conditions: Yanbian is severed from Korea by the Tumen River, a deep scar that cuts through the land. The river physicalizes the area's history: not just the rupture of Korea, but the subsequent isolation of the North as it hides in plain sight. For the inhabitants of this rift, the ground on either side folds up to become two facades of the Old Korea, flattened images of impenetrable worlds. One side is on original soil under a new regime, the other conserves its culture on a ground without history.

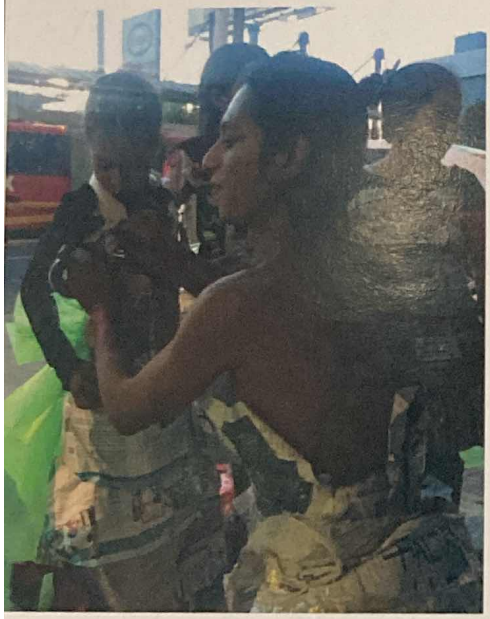
Although seemingly isolated, Yanbian is an in-between space, mediating the exchange of goods and information between two radically different halves of a divided nation. This exchange acts as

SAM CHOI | CASSANDRA ENGSTROM



a bridge to the past—preserved artificially within the insular walls of North Korea, and the Joseonjok's likely future—being absorbed into South Korea. But it is also unwelcome, because it undermines the culture of the Joseonjok. Not only are young people leaving for the cities of South Korea, but the steady influx of North Korean defectors, transients who sometimes resort to theft or violence, is breaking down Yanbian's serenity. The infiltration and population loss combine to render the Joseonjok's disappearance invisible. The Joseonjok do not, moreover, work to leave monuments to their presence. They live their lives quietly, diligently, with the perseverance that comes from years of providing for themselves; they plant and gather their food and tend their physical environment. They represent the ghost of a lost Korea that will soon inhabit a past-tense space of its own.

STREET PERFORMANCE ART IN SAN JUAN, LIMA AND DISTRITO FEDERAL



This exhibition reflects an ongoing effort to discover the artists who do street performance—free theater—in Latin America. Street performance can be as large as an orchestrated parade or as small as a solo harmonium concert, absurdist in its intentions or dedicated to public grief and outrage. For this Menschel project, I traveled to San Juan, Puerto Rico; Lima, Perú; and Distrito Federal, México with the American composer, musician, and performance artist Baxton Alexander. In these sites of our heritage, we investigated relationships between "street performance" (folk) and "performance art" (laboratory) practices: how they are distinct and how they might/already intersect.

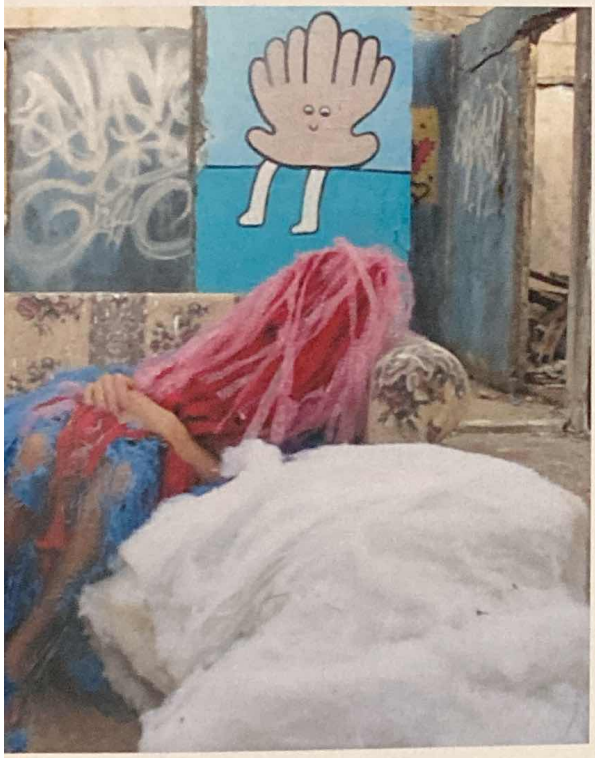
In San Juan, I made a short film with the queer surrealist puppetry duo Clonesomos in La Perla (the slave quarters of the old city, now home to an emerging art colony); Alexander sang with puppetry collective Poncili Creación at the Museo del Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico. For these artists (who both use recycled upholstery foam as a primary medium) the street, the DIY venue, and the art gallery are all valid stages.

In Lima, Alexander and I teamed up again for Encuentro, an international performance art panel and festival organized by Anaze Izquierdo. For our contribution, Alexander invited audiences to graffiti asemic (that is, unreadable) alphabets on the gallery walls; as this was happening, I gave stick-and-poke tattoos of the asemic lettering to consenting gallery goers, finding permanence in skin within a temporary installation. In a second iteration of this performance, we burned 26 hand-printed signs, each depicting a letter of the Latin alphabet. Later, on the streets of Lima, we used asemic signage as props for improvised, absurdist theater.

ARI FERDMAN

In Distrito Federal, during a public rally in Alameda Central Park following the violent disappearance of 43 students last year at Ayotzinapa, we befriended actor, director, and visual artist José Alberto Patiño. We found him protesting with comrades in newspaper dresses painted with the phrase "NOS FALTAN 43" ("WE'RE MISSING 43") in red. Later we joined Patiño's queer, anti-racist, mock-televisual street cabaret for a day, performing for an encampment of striking teachers. For the past ten years as Proyecto 21, Patiño and over 200 collaborators have worked to combat consumerism and mass cultural exploitation via workshops, performances, caravans, alternative fashion runways, and the creation of over 400 costumes. Patiño and I remain in touch, discussing a possible project involving conversations with the families of the disappeared students.

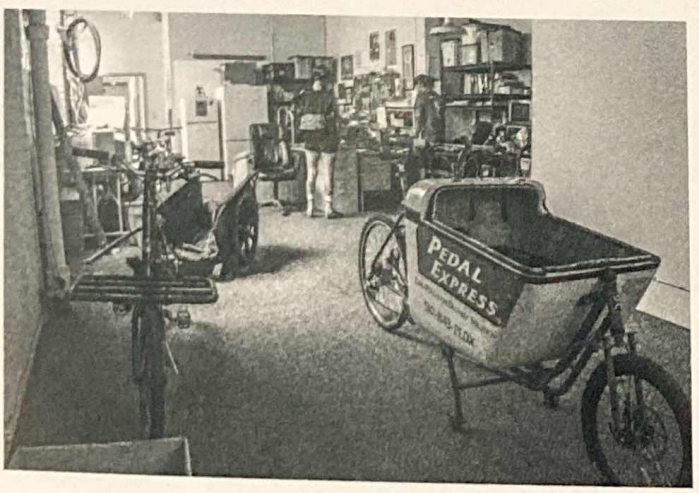
ARI FERDMAN

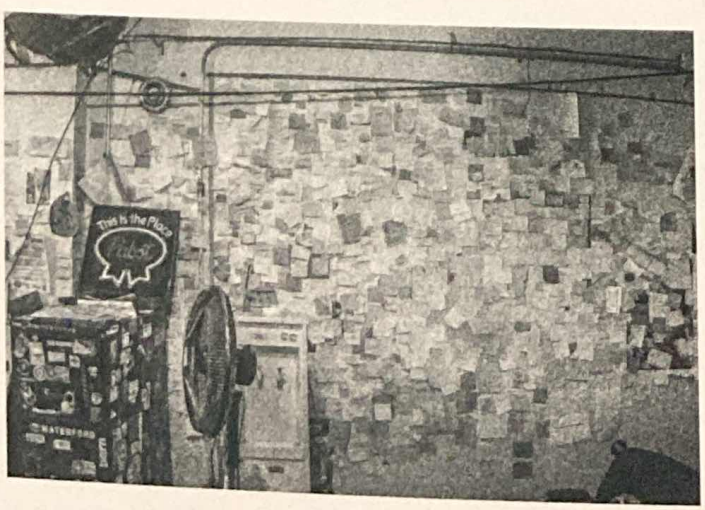


"Mi verdadera salvacion es la colaboracion. Colaboro con otros con la esperanza de desarrollar puentes entre mis obsesiones personales y el universe social."
(My true salvation is collaboration. I collaborate with others in hopes of developing bridges between my personal obsessions and the social universe.)

—Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Chicano artist

INVISIBLE INFRASTRUCTURES: GHOSTS ON THE STREET





BRANDON LOCKFOOT

The job of the bicycle messenger blossomed in America around the end of the '70s as the fastest way to move a huge variety of things throughout the metropolitan area. Since then, fax machines, the Internet, and the recent explosion of the smart phone's "need it now" ethos have changed the way we send mail and communicate. This last decade has seen a sharp decline in the workflow that supports the messengers. Their courage, inventiveness, and esprit de corps represent a culture that is passing away.

This project began as an exploration into the daily routes of bicycle messengers working in the urban environment. I rode alongside bicycle messengers in fifteen major U.S. cities. Starting on the East Coast, I spent a week in each city on my own

bicycle, following the messengers throughout their daily routines with a GPS monitor.

No weather, traffic, or danger deters these messengers. They, or rather we, pick up and deliver everything from garment bags to architectural plans. Riding with them, I saw that the miles we traveled each day gave us a fast-paced view of the city that was unparalleled in its perspective. Flying through traffic, ducking through yellow lights, we were there one minute, gone the next. Time was our racing partner. Bicycle messengers express a form of knowledge only people in constant danger have. Their bodies know before their minds when to take a quick left or right to avoid an accident.

In doing this project, I discovered how individual each messenger's style really is—how each rider found a way to take alleyways and small passages to create hidden ways to maneuver a city. In effect, the messengers were drawing unique lines through the city with routes that can never be replicated. The unique line each created could only fit in one place in the whole world. Using the GPS monitor, I was able to find in these lines not only a beauty, but also a trace—a form of record of a culture's presence. Since center cities where the messengers' job takes them the most are rapidly changing, some of these routes may not be accessible or even possible in years to come. The lines of their routes become the tangible evidence of their intangible ways into the life of a city.

As cities continue to grow, and people get pushed further and further apart, it is the physical job of the bicycle messenger to connect all these people back together.

BRANDON LOCKFOOT

"Messengers eliminate the distance between people that space creates. So we kinda shrink the world. You're handing it to me, I'm handing it to them; that space in between just disappears."

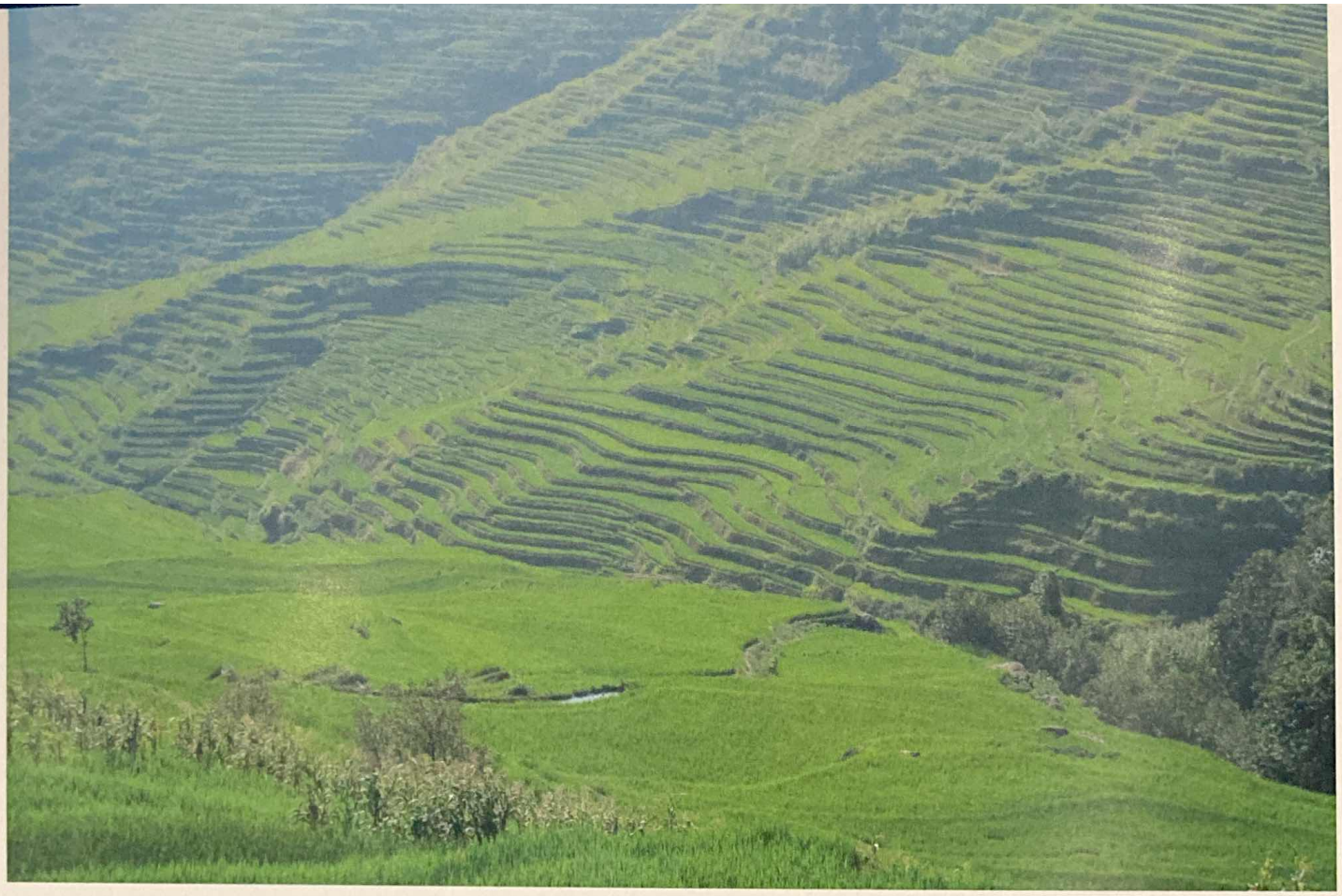
—Greg Ugalde, Bike Messenger

BETWEEN NATURE AND SELF: THE LANDSCAPE OF THE HANI PEOPLE OF YUNNAN, CHINA

In the Yunnan province of China, on the lower reaches of the Red River lives an ethnic minority, the Hani people. Over two thousand years ago, the Hani's ancestors migrated to the Honghe prefecture and responded to the natural landscape by excavating thousands of terraces. Today, the Hani people continue the traditional ways of farming passed on by their ancestors. For the Hani, there is no division between their sustainable agrarian model and their religious beliefs. The planting and harvesting of wet rice roots them to the mountain and water gods, allowing them to be in harmony with nature. Their farming system links four sub-systems: The mountains serve as the source of water; the villages, the interceptor of water; the terraces, the receptor of water, and the river, the water's final destination.

Water is transported from mountain springs through makeshift rubber tubes to water mains situated in benchmark locations within the villages. Small ditches, carved from poorly cast concrete, accommodate the excess water. The water flows into the rice terraces below the villages. A path that parallels a large irrigation channel leads from the villages to the rice terraces. This path is also the site of the local dump—the

VANESSA TAI



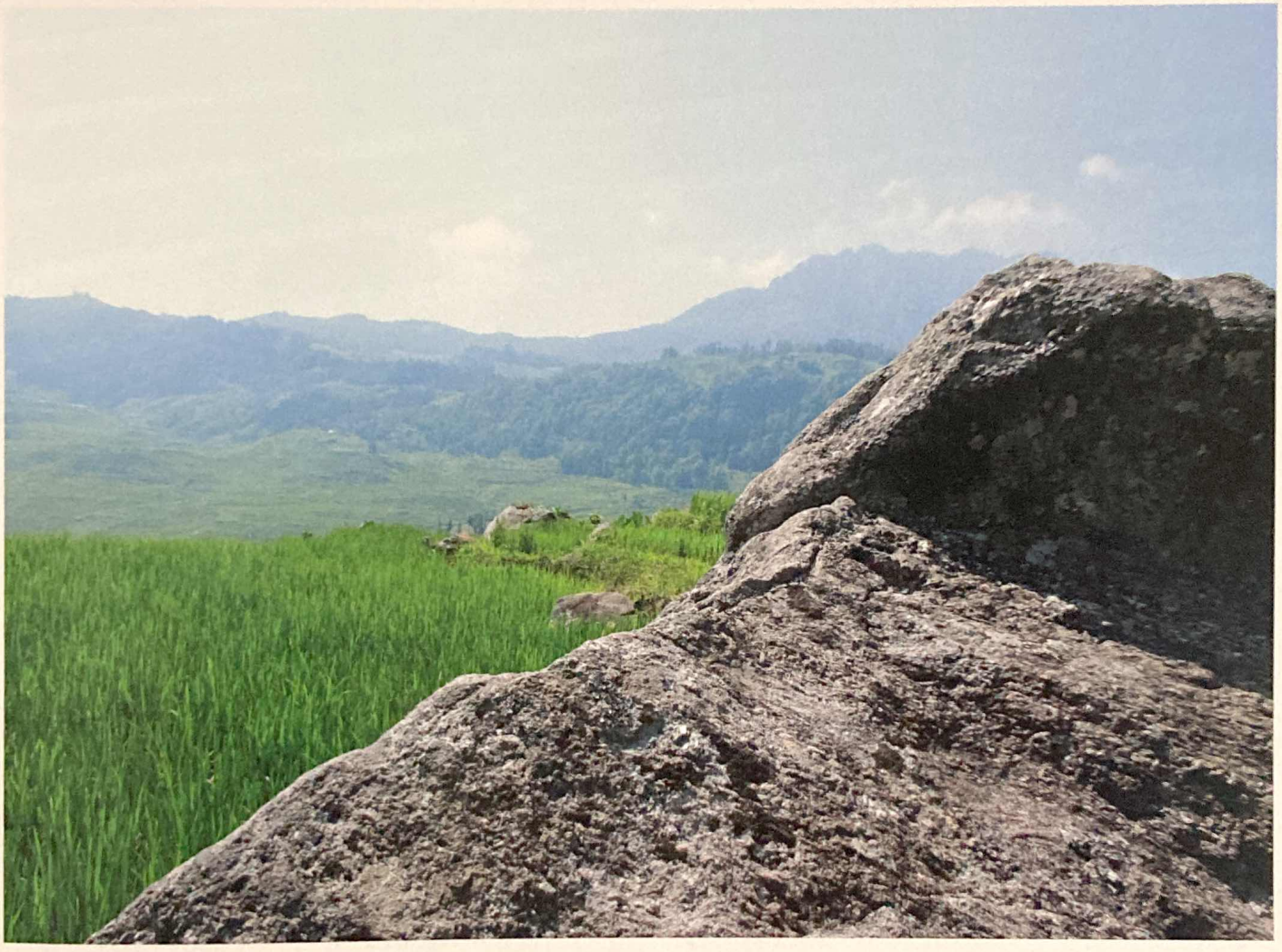
pungent and muddy soil turns into compact retaining walls along paths leading to the fields of lush green rice stalks.

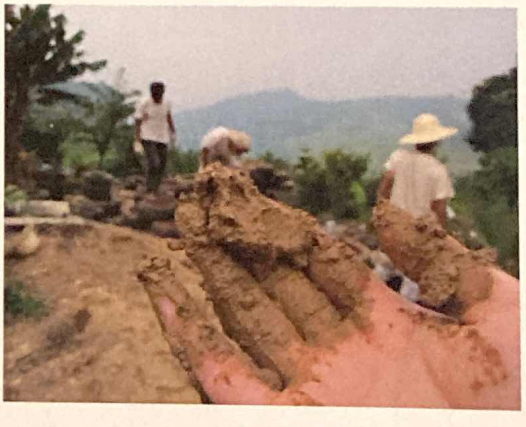
As water enters the terraces, irrigation channels bifurcate into natural streams and artificially formed paths, creating a striking interplay with the sculpted land. Where there are no direct paths, retaining walls serve as the only directional indicators, and place markers such as running water, trees, and boulders are vital to knowing where one is located. Because distance is so hard to judge and vantage point makes such a vast difference in what one sees, walking through the terraces feels as if one is wandering through an open maze.

The terraces look very different depending on where one stands. Seen from observation decks, the terraces no longer read as layers, becoming a mass of rolling hills, steep valleys, and indents of merging streams. Seen from a single vantage point, the effect is a vast imagery of what appears to be green grass interspersed with patches of forests, a harmonization of cultivated and wild landscape.

Despite rigorous research on the soil type, crop organization, and ecology of the rice terraces, the experiential aspect of being immersed in them eclipses any purely scientific appreciation. This is apt, as the Hani's rice terraces are not the result of precise calculations or scientific studies, but of the Hani people's practical experience of trial and error.

VANESSA TAI





Lauren Bishop and Max Gideonse